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TALES OF THE HEROIC AGES BEOWULF



BEOWULF AND THE OLD WIFE OF THE WERE.

ZENAÏDE • A • RAGOZIN



NEW YORK
WILLIAM BEVERLEY HARISON

1900



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Tales of the Heroic Ages

Siegfried, Hero of the North

Beowulf, Hero of the Anglo-Saxons

Frithjof, Viking of Norway

Roland, Paladin of France

12mo, boards

WILLIAM BEVERLEY HARISON

New York



THE DEATH OF BEOWULF.

Tales of the Heroic Ages

BEOWULF

THE HERO OF THE ANGLO-SAXONS

BY

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Contents

BEOWULF

	PAGE
PROLOGUE	213

LAY I.—GRENDEL

I.—HEOROT	219
II.—GRENDEL	222
III.—A FRIEND IN NEED	226
IV.—THE WARDEN	228
V.—THE ARRIVAL	231
VI.—THE RECEPTION AND THE PLEDGE	234
VII.—THE FEAST	237
VIII.—THE COMBAT	244
IX.—REJOICINGS AND THANKSGIVINGS	249
X.—HEOROT RESTORED—FEASTING AND GIFTS	253

LAY II.—GRENDEL'S MOTHER

I.—THE AVENGER	259
II.—THE MERE	263
III.—UNDER THE WATERS	267
IV.—THE RETURN	272
V.—LAST WORDS	275
VI.—HOMEWARD BOUND	283
VII.—AT HOME	287

LAY III.—THE DRAGON

I.—THE TREASURE	294
II.—THE ATTACK	299
III.—WIGLAF	304
IV.—VICTORY AND DEATH	307
V.—WIGLAF'S REBUKE—DISMAY AND TEARS	313
VI.—THE OBSEQUIES	318
NOTE ON THE "BEOWULF"	323

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PROLOGUE

AMONG the nations of the far North, there was none braver, more hardy, nobler, than the Danes—none whose deeds in war were sung of more proudly at the feasts of earl and thane. Many were the kings whose names came from the inspired lips of Skalds, as their hands struck the stringed harp, in warlike or in mournful chords ; but of these names none were treasured more reverently than those of the Skyldings, the oldest royal house known to Danish tradition. It is a very long time—over a thousand years—since the Danes ruled in England. Yet even then the deeds of the Skyldings were tales of long ago. So long ago that they had become mixed up with much fable ; and especially the beginnings of the fa-

mous race were so intertwined with the wonders of heathen Scandinavian antiquity that it has never been possible to decide exactly how much was history and how much myth.

The father of the race, Skyld of the Sheaf, was great in the memory of his people. With his nobles—his ethelings—he had wrested lands and glory from many a neighbouring tribe—aye, and many a distant one, too; the dread of him fell on the bravest warriors; he waxed great under the sun, he flourished in peace, till that every one of the neighbouring peoples over the sea was constrained to obey him and pay tribute; and the world said of him when he died, "That was a good king!"

Yet Skyld was not born to the crown. In fact no one knew anything of his birth and parentage. He was sent, it was said, just when the country had need of a deliverer and leader. He had come one day,—so the story ran,—over the sea, in a beautiful ship, a new-born infant, bedded on sheaves of wheat, when the Danish

people were in sore distress because of the wickedness of the man who was, at the time, king over them.

This man's name, Heremod, went down, unforgotten, but unhonoured, through many a generation, a by-word for bad monarchs. He was, in everything, the direct contrary of what a good ruler ought to be. He used his power, not for his nobles' benefit or pleasure, but to deal them wanton harm and even death. For his ungovernable temper grew on him, until, in his furious fits, he would strike and kill, though it were his closest followers, his companions at the board and in the battle. In his soul there grew a bloodthirsty passion, and he suffered the penalty of his evil doings in the estrangement of his friends, the settled dislike of his people, until at last they would stand his presence no longer, and he wandered forth alone, away from all human society, and was never heard of more. It was then that Skyld, the mysterious founding, the Heaven-sent, seized on the government, brought order and plenty into

the land, and won love from his people, respect from his foes.

A son was born to King Skyld in his prime, a beautiful child, whom God sent for the people's comfort and solace—Beowulf, sole heir to the throne. From his earliest years he was full of promise, a model of what a young chief should be while still in his father's care—always ready with gracious words and open hand, so that in his riper age willing comrades in return were ready to stand by him in war, and men gladly did his bidding. Then, surrounded and assisted by devoted friends who grew up with him, he was enabled to perform deeds which filled the world with praise of him.

As for Skyld, he departed, in the fullness of time, ripe in honours and years, to go into the Master's keeping. His faithful comrades then carried him forth to the shore of the sea, as he himself had ordered. The black, heavy earth should have no part in him; the sea had brought him, the ever-moving, many-hued; the

sea should bear him hence, after his long years of power.

There at anchor rode the ship, glistening fresh, outward bound, fit for a prince. Down they laid their illustrious dead, the dear chief of the land, dispenser of bounties, on the lap of the ship, by the mast. There was great store of precious things ; ornaments from remote parts, weapons of rare worth, mail armour finely wrought, and harness glittering in silver and in gold ; a multitude of treasures, which were to pass with him far away into the watery realm. Furthermore they set by him the royal banner, gold-broidered, high over his head. As its folds unfurled and glittered in the breeze, it told the skies, and the sun, and the stars of night, that a King went forth into the world, on his last voyage. They set the helm, and gave him over to the ocean, sad at heart, with tear-dimmed eyes, and silent in their mourning. And Who received that burthen—no man under heaven, be it priest or chieftain or wise seer, can ever tell or know.

Thus Skyld of the Sheaf was honoured

in death after the manner of the mighty
dead of oldest times among the strong-
hearted sons of the North. From the
Unknown he came and into the Unknown
was borne away.





LAY I
GRENDL

HEOROT

THEN Beowulf of the Skyldings sat in the seat of his father, loved of his people, for a long time famous among the nations, and was succeeded in turn by his son. The royal race of the Skyldings prospered greatly, and when the crown came to his grandson Hrothgar, its greatness seemed assured for all time. Hrothgar was a youth of goodly parts; brave and ambitious in war, yet delighting in the gentle works of peace, a born commander always. So that his brothers and cousins gladly took him for their leader,

and a young brood of devoted clansmen grew up around him, valiant in battle, merry companions at the board. With these he did some mighty deeds, winning renown and riches, when they were young together, and as together they grew old, he loved to sit with them at the feast, enjoying well-earned rest, rehearsing the toils and joys of the brave old days, and listening to sweet minstrelsy from the lips of God-inspired bards.

Now Hrothgar was very wealthy and his comrades were too many for an ordinary hall, even that of a king's palace. So he bethought him of having men build for him a great banqueting-hall, greater than the children of men had ever heard tell of, that he might spend there happy, careless days, dealing out freely to old and young the goods that God had blessed him with.

The fame of the work spread rapidly and widely, and more than one tribe curiously watched its progress. It came to an end with a quickness which surprised all men, and there the fair structure stood,

towering aloft into the blue air, the greatest of all hall buildings, a gathering place for happy men, defying destruction except from the irresistible might of fire. It was called Heorot—Hart-hall—because of the noble crown of antlers which ran round the eaves of the building,—and the opening banquet was an event long remembered in the land, from the bountiful hospitality dispensed by the King and the wealth of gifts, in rings and other precious things, which he gave away with almost reckless lavishness on this occasion.





II

GRENDEL

BUT there was one apart from all this joy who was consumed with malice and with hatred, who vowed to turn the joy into direst grief, the shouts of gladness into moans and wails, ere many days had come and gone. True, no human wight was he, but one of the unholy brood of monsters, accursed of God, who dwell in moors, fens, and swamps, remote from God-fearing men, ever bent on doing hell's work of harm and destruction—the unblest posterity (so wise men tell) of Cain, the first shedder of innocent blood.

To this Grendel, this outcast creature, dwelling in darkness, it was torture unbearable to hear the sounds of rejoicing day by day, as they came, borne by the

wind to him, across the moor--the tender sighing of the harp, the ringing song of the minstrel.

Once, one skilled in holy song told of the creation of the world: how the Almighty made the earth, radiant with beauty, and the waters that encompass it, delighting in His work; and how He ordained the sun and the moon, for light to the dwellers on the earth, and made the woods beautiful with boughs and leaves; and how He put life into all the things that breathe and move.

Grimly the wicked one hearkened to the strain, which fed his unholy fury until it craved for slaughter, fell, immediate.

He set out that very night, as soon as darkness descended, made straight for the lofty hall. He did not much fear detection, for he knew that after such a carousal the warriors would be overcome with sleep. And truly, there they lay, in the hall itself, with their weapons by their side, yet helpless as unarmed women. He went, and, in their sleep, seized and killed thirty of the thanes; then hied him back

to his moor with the war spoils, yelling with fierce joy.

Then was there a great cry in the grey morning. The voice of weeping was raised where but now the song of gladness had filled the air. Dazed and woe-begone, the King sat in his high place, and wept for his thanes. But when, the very next night, Grendel returned and committed even greater murder, and again and again after that, terror seized on them all. Men kept in close hiding from nightfall to break of day, then gradually left their own well-appointed homes, sleeping in barns or in the open, away from dwellings, wherever they thought they could best bestow themselves for safety; but naught availed to save. For twelve winters' space the baleful fiend warred single-handed against the Skyldings and their friends, till all the best houses stood deserted. Unbounded were the sorrows of that dreadful time, unspeakable the distress, and the fame thereof was carried to foreign lands in ballads and moving tales. Men dared not go within miles of the fated moor; so travel was stopped, trib-

ute remained unpaid ; for the foul ruffian, a dark shadow of death prowled about and lay in wait. Of night he continually held the misty moors ; and no one knew what way the hellish birth moved in his rounds, for never was the monster seen of man. As to Heorot, the richly decorated hall, Grendel made that his headquarters, and occupied it every dark night. Only he was never able to come near the throne, because it stood on a consecrated spot, and was hallowed by priestly benison.

A great affliction, heart-breaking, was this that had come on the Skyldings and their friends. Many a time and oft did the best and wisest sit in council, seeking what were best be done in these awful straits. So sorely were they bested, that they forgot at times that they were Christians, and more than once craved help against the goblin visitant from the old heathen gods, vowing sacrifices at their secret shrines.

Thus was King Hrothgar perpetually tossed with the trouble of that time, and not all his wisdom availed to ward off the evil.



III

A FRIEND IN NEED

THERE lived at that time among the Goths, at the right hand of their King, Hygelac, a young thane, his cousin, of the name of Beowulf. He was, as his name betokened, one of the Skylding race, but only in the female line. Young as he was, he had won for himself a name of wide renown as a hero of high achievement and the mightiest among all the men of his time.

Now, this brave thane, in his distant home, heard of the misdeeds of Grendel, and his heart ached for the aged King, the evening of whose days was clouded over by such unheard-of tribulation. He made up his mind to help, and sued to King Hygelac for permission to undertake the venture with a few picked comrades. His friends of the King's council and board

praised the gallant youth to the skies. They egged on his daring spirit, they took omens and consulted signs on his behalf ; but they did not begrudge him the adventure, wise men that they were, even though he was dear to them.

Beowulf ordered a good ship to be made ready for him, to take him over the road that swans travel.¹ He selected fourteen champions among the Goths, the keenest he could find, and went to sea with them, having made sure of a skilful, experienced pilot, who knew the shallows and the deeps. Like a bird the good ship, tight-timbered, slender-necked, sped before the wind, and made such way that on the next day already the eager voyagers saw land, gleaming cliffs, hills towering, headlands stretching out to sea : the passage was ended. Lightly the ethelings sprang ashore, made fast the ship, shook out their garments, saw to their arms, and gave thanks to God for that their seafaring had been easy.

¹ Literally true : the North Sea is the "path of the swans" and to this day wild swans abound on the coast of Norway.



IV

THE WARDEN

WHILE Beowulf and his friends were busy with their landing, thinking only of the work before them, the Skyl-dings' warden, he whose duty it was to guard the sea-cliffs and report any strangers that hove in sight, espied them from his high watch-place. Moved by curiosity as much as by duty, he rode down to the beach in great excitement, brandishing a powerful, huge lance, and demanded, in no gentle terms, to know the strangers' errand and nationality, before they could be allowed to proceed any farther into the land of the Danes.

Beowulf at once stepped forth and spoke up for all, with a dignity and courtesy which shamed the rude officer into more manly

THE LANDING OF BEOWULF.



behaviour. He gave a full account of himself, then concluded :

“ We have come with friendly intent to visit thy lord. We have a great message to him ; nor is there, to my mind, any need to keep it dark. For it is no secret that the Skyldings are in great tribulation because of a mysterious fiend, who has been vexing them for years with his nightly depredations. Now I can teach Hrothgar the remedy, and bring back better times. This I say in all sincerity of heart.”

To this speech the warden replied in greatly altered tones :

“ I gather from what I hear that this is a friendly band come to visit the lord of the Skyldings. But it is a faithful servant's part to question sharply and to gain certainty on all points before he commits his lord. Keep your arms and march on : I will guide you. Likewise will I command my kinsmen thanes honourably to keep against every foe your vessel here on the beach.”

Upon this invitation the troop gaily left their ship riding safely at her anchor, and

eagerly pressed forward, until their eyes beheld the far-famed hall, Heorot the gold-roofed, most renowned of all mansions under the sky. Then the warden pointed with his hand to the road which led straight to it, wheeled round his horse, and spoke a parting word :

“It is time for me to go. May the all-wielding Father graciously keep you safe in adventures ! As for me, I must hie me back to the shore, to keep my watch against foes from the sea.”





V

THE ARRIVAL

THE road was stone-paven, and so straight, there was no need of a guide. Beowulf and his band marched up to the Hall in grim, warlike guise, their burnished corslets shining, the iron rings of their mail shirts clanging loud. When they reached the mansion, the weary men set down their broad shields, leaning them against the wall, and seated themselves in silence on the bench before the entrance, after stacking their spears together, ready to their hand. Thus they waited in dignified silence for somebody to come from King Hrothgar and challenge them.

Very soon an officer appeared and put the customary questions, to which he added some respectful compliments :

"I am," he said, "Hrothgar's herald and esquire. Never saw I foreigners of loftier mien. I think that ye have come to visit Hrothgar, not from desperate fortunes, but bound on some high undertaking."

To which the proud leader replied with gallant bearing :

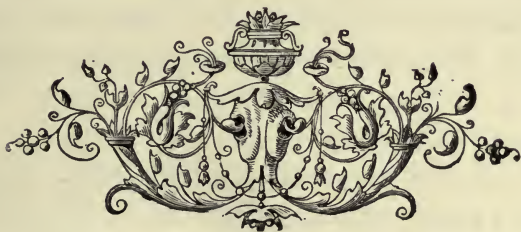
"We are Hygelac's own table-fellows. My name is Beowulf. I will myself expound mine errand to thy lord, if so he deign to admit us to his presence."

The officer, Wulfgar by name, hastened forthwith to where Hrothgar sat, old and hoary, and bent with grief, amid his despondent warriors, and not only told of the valiant guests from the land of the Goths and their petition, but advised him to give them a friendly reception. In the deep distress of these sorry times, it seemed as though any change must be for the better, and every stranger must bring hope.

The sad old King brightened at mention of Beowulf's name, whose father he had known in the dear departed days of golden

youth, and whose own renown he pleasantly recalled.

“This son,” he said, “I mind him well. I knew him when he was a page. He has grown into a valiant campaigner. It is said that he has thirty men’s strength in his handgrip. Surely God of His grace hath sent him to us in our great need. Bid him and his men, one and all, into my presence straight, with every martial honour. Say to them, moreover, in words, that they are welcome.”





VI

THE RECEPTION AND THE PLEDGE

WULFGAR, nothing loth, took the royal message to the waiting guests and ushered them into the royal presence in full warlike equipment, helm on head, sword on hip. Beowulf, tall and commanding, his corslet of cunningly linked mail shining as a network of lights, took his stand before the King, and, with firm eye and becoming assurance, spoke thus at length of what was nearest to his and the Danes' hearts :

“To Hrothgar hail ! I am King Hygelac's cousin-thane. Many a deed of daring was mine in youngsterhood. All that ye suffer here from Grendel became known to us in Gothland. Seafaring men told us how that this hall, this most princely fabric,

stands useless and empty each night, as soon as the star of day is hidden from view. Then did my people, the wisest and best among them, urge me that I should visit thee, O royal Hrothgar. Because they knew the strength of my arm of their own knowledge: time and again they had seen me return from the field battered by foes, but never beaten; five monsters I bound on land, and in the waves I slew many a nicor¹ in the night-time. And now I am bound to champion thy quarrel, O King, single-handed, against Grendel, the evil giant. But one petition I have, which thou, O Shelter of the Danes, wilt not refuse to one who is come from far to serve thee: it is that I may have the task alone—I and my band of earls—to purge Heorot. And as I have learnt that the terrible one, out of sheer boastfulness, despises the use of weapons, so I too will forego them, and bear not sword, nor spear, nor broad

¹ "Nicors" are mischievous water-sprites, who delight in making trouble for ships and sailors. The feminine in German is "Nixe," the beautiful water-maiden who lures mortals down into her watery abode.

shield to my battle with him ; but with handgrip alone will I meet him, foe to foe, and him of the two whom the Lord doometh, let grim Death take for his own.

“Should the doom fall upon me,” Beowulf went on, “thou wilt not, O King, be put to the trouble of building a mound over my head. For if all tales of Grendel be true, he will bear away the gory corpse, to feast on it in his lonely moor. But this do thou for love of me ; send to Hygelac the matchless armour that protects my breast—it is a work of Weland, cunningest of smiths, and such are not made nowadays ; meet gift from a departing friend.”





VII

THE FEAST

TO this speech, manly and heroic, Hrothgar made reply in many words—for age is not sparing of its breath in words. He gave thanks to the God-sent young champion ; he went back to the deeds of his youth, in company with his brothers and many brave comrades long dead ; he dwelt on the horrors of these latter years. Then, at length bethinking himself that the wayfarers must be a-weary and a-hungered, he said to the chief :

“ But now sit thee down to the banquet with thy fellows, and merrily share the feast as the spirit moves thee.”

A table was promptly cleared for the Goths. Thither they went, and sat in the pride of their strength. A thane at-

tended to their wants, going from one to the other with a mighty ale-can of handsome workmanship. Again and again he poured out the golden ale. At times a minstrel's voice rose in Heorot, ringing and clear, and there was right brave merriment and good-will in this mixed company of Goths and Danes.

Yet was there one eye that gleamed not with merriment and good-will, one head that hatched no friendly thoughts, because the heart swelled with malice and envy. Unferth it was, the King's own story-teller, who sat at his feet, to be ready at all times to amuse him. He broached a quarrelsome theme—an adventure in Beowulf's early youth, the only contest in his record the issue of which, though hard fought, might be called doubtful. For this Unferth was an envious wight, whose soul grudged that any man should achieve greater things than himself.

“Art thou not,” he began tauntingly, “that same Beowulf who strove with Breca on open sea in a swimming match, in which ye both wantonly exposed your lives, and

no man, either friend or foe, could turn you from the foolish venture? A se'n-night ye twain toiled in the realm of the waters, and, if I err not, he outdid thee in swimming, for he had greater strength. Wherefore I fear me much thou mayest meet with sorry luck if thou darest to bide here for Grendel for the space of a whole night."

Beowulf, though angered, controlled his temper and replied with great coolness :

"Big things are these, friend Unferth, which thou hast spoken ; evidently, good ale has loosened thy wits. Yes,—Breca and I used to talk between ourselves when we were pages, and brag each of his prowess, being but youngsters, and so we made up the foolish match between us, and having made it, we stuck to it. Drawn sword in hand we went into the water : we meant to guard ourselves against sea-monsters and water-sprites. Five nights we kept close together, then the flood parted us. It was a dark night, freezing cold, and a fierce wind from the north came dead against us, the waves running rough and

high. One spotty monster dragged me to the bottom ; but I did not lose my grip on my sword and despatched the mighty sea-brute. I know not how many more I fought and killed : it was a grewsome night. At last, light broke in the east, and the waves grew calmer, so I could see the headlands, and the sea cast me up on the shore. I escaped with my life, though worn and spent, and never heard I of harder fight, or of man sorer distressed. Anyhow, it was my good luck that I slew with the sword nine nicors. So many less were left to play havoc with seafaring ships. Therefore, methinks I may rightly claim that I have proved more sea-prowess, endured more buffetings from waves, than any other man."

Thus Beowulf told of his youthful prank. Then turning upon Unferth with flashing eye and clouded brow—

"Of a sooth," he cried, "I say to thee, Unferth, that never had Grendel, the foul ruffian, made up such a tale of horrors, wrought such disgrace in Heorot, if thy spirit were as high as thou wouldst claim

for thyself. But he has found out that he has not much to fear from the mighty Danes ; so he takes blackmail, and slaughters and feasts at his ease. But now the Goth shall ere long show him another kind of spirit, and when the light of another day rises over the world, then shall all who choose walk proudly into the hall, with head erect."

This speech, so brave and cheery, gladdened the old King's heart, and even the Danes applauded it, although it held a bitter sting : they took it as a well-deserved hit at the unmannerly Unferth. So laughter greeted Beowulf's words, music sounded again, jolly drinking-songs filled the hall ; and none seemed to remember—although at heart none forgot it—that night was coming on, and what it was to bring.

And now, behold ! Hrothgar's royal consort, Queen Wealhtheow, well versed in ceremonies and courtly lore, entered the hall, resplendent in cloth of gold, to honour her husband's guests with a gracious word and a draught of sweet

mead from her own royal hands. Her stately greeting took in all the men in the hall; then she presented the beaker with graceful obeisance to her lord, wishing him blithe at the banquet, and happy in his liegemen's love. Then she went the round of the hall, to elder and younger, and to each she handed the jewelled cup, until she came to where Beowulf was sitting among the young ethelings. With befitting dignity she greeted the leader of the Goths, as he stood before her, thanking God with wise choice of words that her heart's desire had come to pass. He, the hero of many battles, took the beaker from her hand, and, ere he drained it, repeated his solemn pledge :

“ When I went on board and sat in my ship, as she sped over the waters, with this my chosen band, I vowed I would work out the deliverance of your people. I am bound as an earl to fulfil my vow, or in this hall to meet my death to-night.”

He quaffed the mead, and she, the noble lady, inclined her diademed head as she took from him the cup, for his



QUEEN WEALHTHEOW PLEDGES BEOWULF.



words were well to her liking. Then slowly, with trailing robes, she walked to the head of the hall, to sit by her lord.

For some time yet the banqueting went on as merrily as ever,—until the daylight began to wane, when suddenly song and laughter died on the revellers' lips, and King Hrothgar bethought himself that it was time to retire, for he knew that the monster came forth when shrouding night descends and the creatures of darkness go stalking abroad. In silence all the company arose.

Hrothgar greeted Beowulf and spoke solemn words :

“ Never before, since my hand lifted shield, did I entrust the Guard-house of the Danes to any man,—never but now to thee. Have and hold the sacred house against the foe. Be watchful, valiant, and may victory wait on thee ! No wish of thine shall go unfulfilled if thou dost perform the great work and livest to tell it.”

Thus spoke Hrothgar the Skylding, and gravely departed from the hall, with his Queen, followed by his men.



VIII

THE COMBAT

SILENTLY Beowulf looked after the Danes ; silently he began to divest himself of his armour, mindful of his vow to fight the goblin bare-handed. He laid off his shining mail, his helmet and his sword of choicest steel, and gave them in charge to his esquire ; then he stretched himself on the floor and laid his cheek on a pillow. For the hall had meanwhile been promptly cleared of tables and benches, which were pushed against the walls, and couches of soft pelts and rugs were spread on the floor. His comrades did likewise. Not that rest came to any of them at first ; for not one thought in his heart he should ever again see his own folk, his native land, the castle where

he was nurtured. But even as they kept turning these things over in their minds, their limbs relaxed, their lids grew heavy with very weariness, and—they slept. All slept, but one,—and he lay quite still, straining his ear to listen and his eye to peer through the dim night.

And hark! tramp, tramp, he came marching from the moor,—Grendel, the God-sent scourge. Straight for the hall he made through the gloom: it was not the first time he visited Hrothgar's home-
stead; but never had he met such a welcome as now awaited him there.

He came carelessly along, as one assured of his entertainment. The door, though fastened with bars of wrought iron, sprang open at his touch. Quickly he stepped across the flagged floor, big with rage, with eyes ablaze. Suddenly he perceived the troop of strange warriors, lying close together, asleep. He laughed aloud. He gloated as he stood over them, and thought that, ere day came, the life of each of them should have been wrenched from the body, since luck had sent him such a treat.

Beowulf curbed his rage to watch the fell ruffian and see how he meant to proceed. The delay was not long: Grendel quickly, at one grab, seized a sleeping warrior, tore him up, crunched the bony frame, drank the blood from the veins, swallowed the flesh in huge morsels; in a trice he had devoured the lifeless body, feet, hands, and all. Then he stepped forward to where the hero lay, and reached out a hand to seize him on his bed—but suddenly felt his arm held tight in such a grip as he had never met with from any man in all the world. He knew at once that he was in an evil plight—in mortal fear he strove to wrench himself free and flee. This was not the entertainment he had been wont to meet there in bygone days.

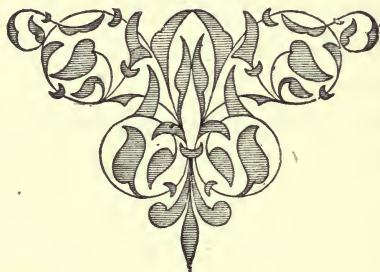
Now all were awake, and the hall was in an uproar. And over at the castle, a deadly panic came over all the Danes, noble or simple, brave men as they were. Furious were both the maddened champions; the hall resounded with their wrestling. It was a great wonder the building

did not fall to the ground; only that it was inwardly and outwardly made strong with iron stanchions, with such masterly skill. In this night of terror it made good the Danes' boast that no mortal force short of fire would ever be able to wreck it.

The noise rose high, with increasing violence. The Danes outside were numb with horror at the unearthly shrieks and dismal howlings of the God-forsaken fiend. Many an earl of Beowulf's unsheathed and plunged into the fight; they knew not that they could not help their leader, much as they desired it, for that no choicest blade on earth could touch that destroyer, because he had secured himself by spells and incantations against weapons of all kinds. But he was not proof against human heroic might, and from that he now got his death-wound, as Beowulf, with a desperate grip and tug, wrenched his arm off from the shoulder. With a terrific yell, which told the listening Danes that the dire struggle was ended, and victory won by their champion, Grendel fled to the coverts of the

fen : well he knew that the number of his days was full.

Thus was the valiant champion's pledge redeemed ; thus was Heorot purged. The leader of the Goths had made good his vaunt, and, in token thereof, he hung up Grendel's hand, arm, and shoulder—grim trophy !—under the gabled roof.





IX

REJOICINGS AND THANKSGIVINGS

EARLY in the morning there was a great gathering about the hall. Chieftains came from far and near, to hear the marvellous tale, to gaze at the loathsome prodigy. Then they took up the vanquished monster's bloody trail, and followed it to the Nicors' Mere, whither, death-doomed and fugitive, he had betaken himself to die. There was the face of the lake surging with blood, the gruesome splash of waves all turbid with reeking gore. There he had yielded up his heathen soul, there pale-faced Hela, the dread queen and guardian of the heathen dead, received it.

After surveying the uncanny spot, they rode home from the Mere in high glee, as from a pleasure-trip. Now and then one

and the other loosened their nags for a gallop, to run a match where the turf looked smooth and inviting. Then again a thane of the King's, his mind full of ballads, stored with old-world tales, began to compose Beowulf's adventure into a story on the spot, to be sung later at the feast, to the sweet-stringed harp. Or yet another compared him to Siegfried, the Dragon-slayer, the greatest hero of all North countries.

Thus, alternately racing and talking and singing, they rode joyously back to the hall, and when they reached there, the sun was already high in the sky, and crowds were still flocking to Heorot; and the King himself, with the Queen and with a gorgeous following of lords and ladies, was coming the short way from his palace to view his enemy's monstrous arm and hand hanging from the gold-glittering roof.

Hrothgar was very different this sunny morning from the bent and sorrow-stricken old man who greeted Beowulf the night before as his last hope on earth. Right royal he looked now in his rich

robes as he walked along with head erect and firm step, and clear, glad eye. He stood awhile, gazing silently on the horrible hand, with fiendish fingers, and nails straight and sharp like steel spikes,—then devoutly raised his voice :

“For this sight thanks be given the Almighty! It was but now that I thought I should never see an end of all my woes—and now a lad, through the might of God, has achieved the deed which we, with all our wisdom, were unable to accomplish. Now I will heartily love thee, Beowulf, thou most excellent youth! From this day forth shalt thou be to me as my son; thou shalt have nothing to wish for in the world so far as I have power. Full oft have I, for far less service, decreed great guerdons from my treasury. May the Almighty reward thee always, as He hath just done!”

Beowulf accepted these thanks and praises with most becoming modesty. Indeed, he rather apologised for having let the enemy escape him; “for,” he said, “I would have liked vastly better to show

thee his very self, instead of only his arm and hand."

Men, in those days, were not, as a rule, shy of boasting of their valorous deeds and making the most of them. Therefore the young hero's quiet bearing won him still heartier admiration and louder applause. One man alone in all that joyous crowd kept silent and to himself—and that was Unferth, the story-teller, who had given vent so freely to his envious malice at the feast. He dared not now either brag of his own doings, or belittle Beowulf's exploit, and so held his peace. But in his heart, alone of all men, he grudged him his triumph.





X

HEOROT RESTORED—FEASTING AND GIFTS

AND now orders were given that Heorot should be promptly swept, cleansed, and decorated; men and women trooped in in great numbers to do the work. No light work it was, for the whole interior of the building was nearly demolished; in fact, the roof alone escaped quite unhurt. Substantial repairs, of course, would take time; but the hall must be garnished and made ready for that day's banquet. So they hid the walls with brocaded tapestries which delighted the eye with their pictured stories.

When the time came, King Hrothgar walked to the Hall, for he intended to

share the entire feast from beginning to end. And never did a braver throng of revellers muster more merrily around the feast-giver.

The first beaker of sweet mead the King drank to Beowulf, and at the same time presented him with a complete suit of precious-wrought, gold-adorned, armour—helmet, coat of mail, and heavy battle-sword, all from the royal treasury. Then, at a sign from the King, eight beautiful horses, with cheekplates of gold, were led into the hall. One of them was gaily caparisoned and bore the King's own favourite saddle, all decorated with silver. Horse and saddle were well known to all present, having been seen often and often both at knightly games and in the field, where foemen fell before the royal rider both in play and in deadly earnest. Arms and horses the King bade the young hero have for his own, and enjoy them well.

Moreover, each one of those who had made the voyage with Beowulf received some precious gift, some old heirloom. As for the comrade whom Grendel had

so atrociously killed and devoured, King Hrothgar gave order that gold should be brought from his treasury, to make good his loss to his people.

And now the King called aloud for music and song. The harp was struck and Hrothgar's minstrel recited a ballad, often heard, but always a favourite, a lay of an old feud and vengeance, which made the revellers realise the more joyfully their deliverance from the tribute of blood which, through so many years, they had unwillingly paid.

The merriment ran high, and high rose the sounds of revelry as the attendants served the wine out of curious flagons. When suddenly there was a pause : Queen Wealhtheow came forward, wearing right nobly her golden diadem, and, as the day before, stood before her lord, and spoke :

“Receive this beaker, King of the Danes ! Be merry thyself, and gladden those around thee with gifts and gracious words. For now, far and near, thou hast peace. Heorot is purged and is once more the most splendid of banqueting-

halls. Dispense, then, thy bounties while thou mayest, and to thy children peacefully leave folk and realm when thy time comes to pass into eternity."

She turned then towards the bench where her young sons sat. And there, by the two brothers, Beowulf modestly sat among the youth of the land, separate from the elders and mighty men. To him the Queen offered the beaker, with friendly words, inviting him to drink, then presented him with her own special gifts: a rich mantle, armlets of twisted gold, and rings, and—crowning gift of all—a jewelled carcanet, the most gorgeous piece of jeweller's work ever seen under the sun.

"Wear this collar, Beowulf, beloved youth," the Queen said, "and make use of this mantle—stately possessions both—Prosper well, win more and more fame by thy valour, and to these my boys be true friend and kind adviser. Thou hast done that which will make thee the theme of minstrels' song, far and near, for all time. Be then, whilst thou livest, a happy

prince, and loyal to my sons in word and deed. For such is the manner of our land: here is each warrior to other true, loyal to their chief; the thanes obedient, the people willing. And now, I bid ye all—be merry!”

With that she walked to her chair, and music once more filled the hall, and wine flowed freely. No thought was there of evil to come, only of the evil from which they deemed that they were freed forever: for who ever hears the fiat of destiny as it goes forth? . . . And so the evening came, and Hrothgar betook him to his rest.

Silence fell upon Heorot; the festive sounds died out. For the first time in many years, the hall was not deserted for the night; the ethelings stayed to guard it as they had often done in earlier times. The benches were cleared away against the walls; beds and bolsters were laid in rows upon the floor, and the revellers laid themselves down to rest, happy and at peace. Yet did one among them lie down that night a doomed man, and knew it not.

At their heads they set up their bright bucklers; on the benches, plain in sight, lay each etheling's helmet and mail-shirt, and against them stood the strong-shafted lances. For such was their custom—to be at all times ready for war, whether at home or in the field, wherever their liege lord might have need of their services. Truly a brave and noble people!





LAY II

GRENDEL'S MOTHER

I

THE AVENGER

SO they sank down to sleep. One there was who sorely paid for that night's rest. For ere morning it was found that Grendel had left an avenger—his mother, the Mere-wife, loathsome beldame, a creature that had to dwell in the dreariness of marshes and cold streams, like all the rest of Cain's murderous, outlawed brood. That very night the hag, on bloody vengeance bent, betook herself to Heorot, where the Danes slept careless, all unconscious. Who shall paint their horror and dismay when the goblin-wife suddenly burst into their midst? Swords were

drawn and bucklers raised, but there was no time to think of helmet or mail-shirt.

The hag was in a hurry; finding herself discovered, all she thought of was to get away with her life. So she quickly snatched up one of the ethelings at random, and gripping him tight, made for the fen. That man was Hrothgar's dearest comrade, most constant companion—sad end for an illustrious warrior! But hurried as she was, the hag managed to carry away with her Grendel's arm and hand. A great cry went up from Heorot, and reached the aged King, who was startled out of his sleep by the news that the old horror was revived, and that the man dearest to his heart was dead.

Beowulf was not there. No one thought that his prowess should be needed again; so, as he was in want of rest after his last night's exertions, he and his companions had been assigned a lodging at some distance, and they knew nothing of what had happened. Bright and early, he and his little band, rested, cheery, marched to the palace, straight to the King's apartment,

the floor-timbers resounding under their tread, and, courteously accosting him, enquired if, according to their sincere wish, he had had a restful night.

Great was their astonishment to find the King more deeply dejected than ever, the tears coursing down his withered cheeks, and to hear his heart-broken answer :

“Speak not of rest to me ! New grief has come over the Danes. *Æschere* is dead, my friend and counsellor, my trusty body-squire, who has stood with me, shoulder to shoulder, in battle, a hundred times. In *Heorot* has he met his death at the hands of another raging fiend. Yesternight didst thou overcome *Grendel* in deadly fight, and now his mother comes to avenge her kin ! I know not in what direction she took her way, but her tracks will show. I will be bound they lead us no farther than the *Mere*, a few miles from here—an uncanny water—wolf-crag, windy bluffs, woods with gnarled, intertwined roots overhang it. A precipitous mountain waterfall vanishes into the earth, and flows on, an underground river. And

on the Mere itself, every night, a fearful portent may be seen : fire playing on the water. The man liveth not who knows the depth of that mere. The antlered hart, as he makes for the wood coverts, harried by hounds, will sooner give up life on the bank, than plunge his head into the unhallowed flood. Now it is once more to thee alone that we look for counsel ! Thou knowest not yet the dreadful haunt—go seek it if thou dare ! I will reward thee with treasure to thy heart's content, if so thou comest away alive."

Beowulf answered straightway, and his brave words fell like balm on Hrothgar's dejected spirits :

"Cease sorrowing, wise sire ! Avenging a friend is better than mourning for him. Arouse thee ! let us promptly set out to find the trail of this new terror. I vow to thee she shall not escape ; neither in the bowels of the earth, nor in the haunted woods, nor in ocean's depth—go where she will ! Have patience but this one day, and all thy woes shall end."



II

THE MERE

UP sprang then the aged King, thanking God for the hero's words, which filled him with new vigour. He mounted his charger, a stately high-stepper with wavy, flowing mane, and rode forth with Beowulf and the mixed band of Danes and Goths, the foot-force of shield-bearing men marching behind. The track lay broad and plain over the ground, down the slope—straight across the murky moor.

Lightly did Beowulf step over steep stone-banks, narrow gullies, lonesome, untravelled paths, sheer bluffs, under many of which were deep caverns, the dwelling-place of nicors. With a few tried men he went forward, exploring the ground, until all of a sudden he perceived the

gloomy trees overhanging the grisly rock of which Hrothgar had spoken—a cheerless wood; beneath it a standing water, dreary and troubled. The whole scene was so desolate and eerie that it made the Danes shudder; horror seized them as they looked, for on that cliff they came on the head of Æschere in a pool of blood.

The horn sounded from time to time a spirited blast to keep them together. But they had little wish to stray. They all sat down on the ground, terrified, yet curious for the weird sights of the Mere: they saw gliding along the water many shapes of serpent kind, monstrous sea-snakes at their swimming gambols; likewise nicors lying lazily on the jutting slopes,—the water-goblins which often, of an early morning, churn up the waves to make disastrous sailing for voyagers,—dragons, and other strange beasts tumbled about, then hurried away with eye of spite and body swelling with rage at being disturbed by the clarion's clang and the intrusion of men. Beowulf, with an arrow

from his bow, picked off one of the monsters, which was swiftly pulled out on land; his swimming days were over, his tricks ended.

But this was play. The business of the day was now to come, and Beowulf began to prepare for it. Piece by piece he donned his princely armour, which was to stand the novel test of deadly battle in the waters of the unholy lake. Most anxiously did his friends, both Danes and Goths, watch and assist him as he silently armed, with brow and mouth firmly set under the helmet, for well they knew that the contest he was now going to engage in was far more dangerous than that in which he had but lately ventured life and limb. Even Unferth, the unmannerly, forgot what he had recently uttered when flushed with ale—or perchance he wished to atone for past ill-will by present service. Enough, he pressed to Beowulf's side, and placed in his hand a wonderful sword, an old heirloom of his house, most highly prized of all his possessions. That precious blade, like other famed swords belong-

ing to mighty heroes, had a name of its own, like a human friend: it was called Hrunting. The edge of the blade was iron, welded onto the brass, mottled with poison, and hardened in the gore of many battles. Never had it proved false to him who wielded it; this was not the first time that heroic work had been required of it.





III

UNDER THE WATERS

AND now Beowulf stood armed, and ready for the fray. But before he went whence he might not come back, he turned to King Hrothgar and once again repeated the request he had made before he remained in Heorot to await the coming of Grendel :

“ See now, O wise King, I am ready to start. Bethink thee of what we lately talked of : that, should I lose my life in thy service, thou shouldst, after my death, fulfil my wishes even as my own father would. They are but few and easily remembered : be thou friend and protector to my thanes when I am gone, and send the presents thou hast given me to Hygelac ; so will he see for himself that I had

found a bountiful friend. And let Unferth keep my own heirloom, my curiously damaskeened sword, Hardedge. With Hrunting I will either achieve renown or find my death."

He said, and, waiting for no answer, leaped from the bluff—the eddying flood engulfed him. So deep was the mere, that it took some time before, sinking, he reached the bottom.

Soon the grim creature that for a hundred seasons had kept house in the watery realm perceived that one of the children of men was coming from above, exploring the goblins' home. She made a grab at him and clutched him in her grisly talons, but could not pierce the well-knit ring mail which fenced him around. But she bore him to her mansion at the bottom of the lake, so swiftly that, although his heart did not fail, he was powerless to use his weapons, the more that countless water-beasts harassed him in swimming, battering at him with tusk and claw.

At length the earl felt the grip loosened on him, and as he hurriedly cast his eye



BEOWULF AND THE OLD WIFE OF THE MERE.



around, he perceived that he was in a vast hall, high-roofed, and protected from the water on all sides ; it was light, too, with an eerie, bright lustre, something like fire-light. But the hero had no time for wonder or exploring ; for before him stood the grim she-wolf of the abyss, and it behoved him to be quick in attack. Grasping Hrunting, he whirled it around her head ; but when it descended to strike, he found, to his dismay, that the edge did not bite ; for the first time the costly blade failed the master at his need. With prompt decision he angrily flung it away, and once again trusting wholly to his own strength, seized the hag by the shoulder, and swayed her so violently in his rage that she sank to the pavement. She swiftly repaid him and closed in upon him, crushing the wind out of his body, so that he, fearless as he was, staggered from sheer breathlessness and fell prostrate. Then the hag sat upon his back and drew her broad knife, and her goblin son would have been avenged then and there, but that Beowulf's mail-shirt was

proof against point and edge, which gave him time for a last mighty effort to throw off the hindering weight,—and presently he stood once more erect on his feet.

Still, even then his life might have been forfeit in the unequal combat, had he not chanced to espy among the armour lying scattered about the hall, an old cutlass of huge size and strength of blade, larger than an ordinary man could have carried, let alone used in battle,—the handiwork of giants. On this Beowulf blindly seized—beside himself, despairing of his life—and struck in his fury; the blow caught the beldame in the neck, severed the bone, she dropped on the pavement,—the work was done.

He was alone. He now had leisure to scan the apartment with his eye; he slowly walked all round it, along by the wall, the magic weapon swung aloft by the hilt, for fear of surprises. Suddenly, he came upon a hideous object—Grendel, bereft of life, lying where he fell, as he reached his lake home on that fatal night. The hero's blood boiled at the sight; he at

once decided he would bring back to the upper world a better trophy than a hand and arm : so, raising high the cutlass, he struck off the head.

Then, before his eyes, there came to pass a thing whereat he marvelled much ; no sooner had the blade touched the monster's black gore, than it began to melt away, even as ice when the spring breathes upon it, dissolving the fetters of the torrent ; and even as he looked, it melted all to naught, down to the hilt in his hand—so venomous and consuming had been the goblin's life-blood !

There were many rare arms and trinkets in that wondrous water hall ; but Beowulf only glanced at them and would not burden himself with aught save the head, and the hilt of the burned-up cutlass, which he wanted to show and keep as a curiosity. Nor would he leave Hrunting below, since the good sword did not belong to him.





IV

THE RETURN

MEANWHILE the hours waxed long to the watchers above. Hrothgar and his men sat in the same spot still, intently gazing on the water. The old men with grizzled locks spoke together in low tones about the brave etheling, how they did not expect that he should ever come back to them ; and when they saw the waves splashing turbid and tinged with blood, most of them decided that the she-wolf of the Mere had torn him to pieces.

It was the ninth hour of the day. The impetuous Danes gave him up for lost and quitted the bluff ; King Hrothgar followed them with heavy heart. They did not doubt but that they had lost their hero-friend, and the nightly ravages would

commence again. But the Goths would not go. Sick at heart they sat on, and gazed upon the dreadful pool. They did not expect to ever again get sight of their lord and captain in the body, yet they kept on wishing, and secretly hoping: for was he not greater and braver than all other men? No other would have even dreamed of plunging into such an adventure.

And lo! what was that? something in the distance, moving on the water! Water-beast it could not be, for they had all slunk away when man and goblin-wife met, and kept in hiding, waiting for the end. It was—yes, it was the leader! Soon they could see him plainly, as he came swimming bravely along. He shouted to them. They answered with a cry which must have been heard half-way to Heorot. Then he came to land, exulting in his lake spoils. His faithful thanes ran to meet him, thanking God that they had him back, whole and sound. They pressed around, vieing who should relieve him of his helmet, his mail-shirt. From the mo-

ment he stepped on land, the Mere sullenly subsided, grey and heavy, leaden water under leaden sky.

And now Beowulf and his band prepared to retrace their steps, for they had quite a long way to march across country and along the public highways. So they formed into a triumphal procession, to bear away Grendel's head from the Mere-cliff : it took four of the lusty and stalwart fellows to carry it on a pole, and the burden taxed their strength to the utmost ; so that, when they reached the great hall, gold-glittering in the sunshine, they were glad to lay it down on the ground. Then others of their comrades took it up and carried it by the hair into the midst of the assembled Danes. Their captain was just greeting the King, but all sprang to their feet ; even to Hrothgar and the Queen, startled out of ceremony by the unexpected sight of the horrible object.



V

LAST WORDS

WHEN some sort of order had been restored, Beowulf, with his wonted modest dignity, gave the King a brief account of his last and most deadly encounter :

“Lo and behold! to thee, O Lord of the Skyldings, we have joyfully brought these Mere-spoils that thou lookest on, in token that what we came to do is done. Not easily did I come out of it with life. In the battle under water well-nigh had the struggle gone against me, only that God shielded me. I could not, in the final test, accomplish aught with Hrunting, though it be a good weapon, too. But the Ruler of men directed my eye to the wall, where it was caught by the

gleam of an old sword of huge size, whereat I grasped, blindly. Thus oftenest hath He guided men when they have no other friend. With that sword—occasion favouring me,—I smote the keepers of the Mere-house, the living and the dead. So hot and poisonous was that accursed blood, that it consumed the blade, as thou canst see. I brought away the hilt as a trophy. And now that I have avenged the long agonies of the Danes as was meet, I promise thee that thou mayest sleep henceforth in Heorot free from care; and so may every one of the thanes, old and young, and thou needest not fear for them any kind of danger, as thou didst so long."

The oldest and wisest among the warriors marvelled much to hear so wise a speech from lips so young. That in the heat of victory, hard-won, single-handed, the noble champion should remember to give thanks where alone man's thanks are due, and should generously share the credit with his comrades, pleased King Hrothgar greatly. With kindly smile he

took the gilded, bladeless hilt into his hand and examined it intently. It was well worth the study, this relic of heathen times immemorial, the workmanship of giants. The mystic smiths had graven much ancient lore on it in quaint old characters, looking like small staves oddly thrown together, and long held sacred by learned men, who called them "Runes." Hrothgar, who, though himself a fervent Christian, was well versed in the ancient heathen lore of his people, easily read the storied gold of the hilt. Upon it was written the history of the primeval quarrel between the bright, beneficent gods and the perverse race of giants, and of the war between them, in which the wicked giants did their worst, by force and wile, to destroy the beautiful world, the creation of the gods, until the latter sent a great flood, and the giant's brood perished. Likewise was it set down in runes on a part of the mounting, for whom that sword had first been worked with its dragon ornament.

When he had examined the curious relic

at his leisure, King Hrothgar returned it to the youth, and bending on him his kindest glance, he spoke to him,—while all around respectfully held their peace,—out of the fulness of his heart and of his long-hoarded wisdom, such words as only a father speaks to a well-beloved son, when he sends him forth to fare for himself in the wide and dangerous world. For well he knew that the hero, his mission done, would leave him very soon, to continue his adventurous career, wherever it might call him, and his heart ached to let him go ; he would fain have warned him of all that might befall him on his way, and given him his own treasure of experience to guide and to shield him,—above all against the dangers and snares of his own untamed nature.

“Thy fame, friend Beowulf,” the King began, “will spread after this to every land, over every nation. Thou dost withal carry thy prowess modestly, with discretion of mind. Thou art fated to prove a comfort sure and lasting to thy men, a help to mankind.”

Here the King recalled, as a warning example, the fate of Heremod, the bad king, who had lost the people's hearts through his arrogance and cruelty, and whom his (Hrothgar's), own ancestor, Skyld of the Sheaf, had displaced.

"Do thou take warning by that!" he continued. "It is for thy benefit that I, being old in years and experience, have told this tale. For, how many a time do we not see a man of noble race who dwelleth in prosperity, with nothing to annoy him, no care nor quarrel on any side, but all the world seems to move to his mind. Until, at length, within the man himself something of arrogancy grows and develops. Then sleepeth the heavenly guardian, the soul's keeper; the foe is very near, and the man yields to the crooked counsels of the accursed spirit; he fancies that all is too little that he has so long enjoyed; he grows covetous and malignant, and grudges to share his wealth with his friends. He too lightly considers how that it was God the Dispenser who placed him in his post of dignity. And

then the end comes ; another fills his room who makes better use of his wealth—he is forgotten. Beware of such a fall, Beowulf, beloved youth, and choose for thyself the better course. Now is thy strength in full bloom for a while. Soon it may betide that sickness or the sword will bereave thee of it ; fire or flood, stab of knife, or flight of spear—anything at any time may mar and darken all, and Death subdue thee, leader of men though thou art ! Look at me : did I not for fifty years reign prosperously over the Danes, and by valour make them secure against many a nation, insomuch that I dreaded no rival under the circuit of the sky ? Yet how suddenly a change came over all that ; here in my own hall, the abominable Grendel bearded and despoiled me, and for years my heart carried its load of grief. Thanks, therefore, be to the Eternal Ruler for what I have lived to see—that I, the old tribulation past, with mine own eyes should gaze upon yon severed head !—And now go, sit thee down, share the festive joy, crowned with the honours of war.

To-morrow we must yet have many dealings together."

Beowulf had listened with beseeming earnestness and reverence, nor did the aged king's wise instruction fall on barren soil. But he was very tired : so he moved briskly off and sat down, nothing loth, on one of the benches. Then the tables were cleared and re-spread, and a fair, fresh banquet served.

Not till the night's dim covering began to descend over the light-hearted revellers did the venerable Skylding arise and give the signal for bed. After him the elders. Vastly well did the hero of the day like the thought of repose—he had enough of adventure for a while ! He was marshalled to his room with much ceremony by a chamberlain, who supplied him with all things needful for a luxurious night's rest. And he slept ! slept till the black raven announced heaven's glory with blithe heart, and the light drove the shadows away, and fiends that prowl of nights scampered off and hid.

When he came forth from his sleeping.

chamber, he found his comrades all ready for the voyage. They were impatient to take ship for home.

Beowulf bade courteous farewell to his Danish friends, and when the turn of Unferth came, he returned Hrunting to him with hearty thanks for the loan; with never a word did he blame the blade that had played him false, but on the contrary praised it for a good sword, a good friend in war. Thus are high-souled men ever courteous and mindful of other men's feelings.





VI

HOMeward BOUND

ONLY when the departing warriors were fully equipped and ready to start, did Beowulf approach the raised platform where Hrothgar sat, to take loving leave of him.

“Now,” he began, “we sea-voyagers have come to say that we purpose this very day to return to Hygelac. Here we have been well entertained, and thou hast been to us very generous. If I therefore may in any way be of use to thee, even though it require labour beyond what I have yet done, I shall be forthwith on hand. If they bring me word across the seas that thou art hard pressed by neighbours, I will at once bring thee a thousand thanes to help. And Hygelac, I know.

albeit young in years, will bear me out in this, and send me over with a forest of spears, shouldst thou have need of them."

The old King was deeply moved as he made answer :

"The All-wise Lord himself, puts such thoughts into thy mind. Never have I heard one so young in years discourse such sweet and reasonable speech. I think it very likely that, should sickness or iron take thy chief from this life, the seafaring Goths will find no better man than thyself to be their king. Thou hast my best wishes, beloved Beowulf, for I like thee more and more. Thou hast done that which will make the Danes and the Goths friends forevermore. While I rule this realm, the two nations shall have all things in common, and ships shall bring back and forward, not men armed for war, but presents and tokens of love."

King Hrothgar rose from his chair of state and pressed on his young friend twelve more priceless jewels, bidding him go with God and visit his people, but come back again soon. He clasped him

by the neck, tears coursing down his cheeks into his long grey beard. To him the youth was so dear that he could not restrain the passion of his sorrow at parting from him, for, in spite of his cheery words, there was that in his breast which warned him that they two were not to meet again.

Beowulf, being young, was not much disturbed by forebodings, and when he left the hall, his foot trod the grassy earth with the firm step of conscious power. As he and his gallant troop neared the water, where their well-guarded ship awaited them, the coast-warden marked their approach, as he had done at their coming; but there was no suspicion now in his mind or manner, as he hailed them from his high peak and rode down swiftly towards them. The beach was all alive as the Goths proceeded, with right good will, to load the good ship with the war harness, the horses, and all the treasures from Hrothgar's hoard. Winds and waves seemed to favour their impatience, and sail and oars carried them smoothly over

the foamy swell, till they were able to espy the familiar cliffs and headlands of the Gothic shore. And now the keel grated on the sand, the wind pushing from behind—she was on land.

The warden was ready to receive the seafarers at the landing ; he had hardly left the water's edge, so anxiously had he been looking for the dear friends who had left him on so perilous, uncertain a venture. And now he helped to bind the ship fast with strong anchor cables, lest a sudden storm might snatch her away, and hastened to give orders to carry ashore the princely cargo.





VII

AT HOME

THEY had not far to go, for King Hygelac, son of Hrethel, had his palace, where he held court with his peers, within sight of the sea. There he dwelt happily with his Queen, fair Hygd, who, though she was very young, and had lived but few winters in her lord's castle, was wise and of excellent discretion, yet not mean-spirited, nor grudging of gifts to the thanes and ethelings—very different in all her ways from another young princess of the Goths, Thrytho, the moody and the proud, even to savagery ; so arrogant and fierce that no man, not even her favourites among the courtiers, durst look in her eyes, but he was sure to be taken and

bound by her order, and the knife was quick to follow arrest. Well did nobles and people murmur, and whisper among themselves that such manner was not queenly, nor womanly, for any lady to practise, although peerless of form and feature ; for woman should ever be a peace-maker, and not a taker of men's lives—on false pretences too. But no one dared to speak aloud what all thought in their secret hearts. So everybody was glad exceedingly when Thrytho was sent off to Angle-land, there to wed the great Offa, King of Mercia, the most powerful of the seven kingdoms. Soon after, however, those who drink at the ale-benches began to tell a different tale, how that she had left off her evil ways from the moment that she reached Offa's hall after her long sea-voyage and been given, gold-adorned, into the noble and brave king's keeping ; and ever since, as long as she lived in her royal state, she was famed for her kindness and gentleness ; she won and kept the love of that most excellent ruler between the seas—for minstrels tell us that Offa

was as famous for his courtly grace and knightly accomplishments as for his feats of war.¹

Beowulf's arrival was promptly made known to Hygelac. Good news in truth, he thought, that his dear companion, his playfellow of yore, was coming back to him alive and unhurt. Quickly, at his command, the interior of the hall was cleared for the home-coming travellers.

Beowulf sat by the King's side, while his comrades were greeted by their friends, and the gentle Queen moved about the hall with beakers of sweet mead ; for she loved her folk and gladly ministered to them.

With eager, affectionate words Hygelac questioned his kinsman about his voyage, his reception by Hrothgar, the battle for Heorot. Beowulf satisfied him fully on

¹ That these two queens with their contrasting characters were introduced by the Christian writer of the poem to convey a moral lesson, is evident from the allegorical names he gives them : " Hygd," in Anglo-Saxon, means " discretion," and " Thrytho," " haughtiness, superciliousness." At the same time it is not improbable that the name of Thrytho may have been suggested by the actual name of Offa's queen, which was " Cynethryth."

all points, and gave him a most detailed account of all that had befallen him, good and evil, during his brief but eventful absence—speaking of his deeds, as was his wont, with heroic simplicity, and dwelling more on Hrothgar's loving-kindness and generosity than upon his own prowess.

When he had told his tale, to which all who were in the hall listened spell-bound, he ordered all Hrothgar's gifts, including four of the beautiful horses, matched to perfection, to be brought into the hall, and then and there presented all to his kinsman and liege lord, bidding him use and enjoy the treasures. As to the carcanet, the curiously wrought, wonderful jewel, which Hrothgar's queen had bestowed on him, he presented that to Queen Hygd, as also three palfreys, keeping only one of the eight horses for his own use, in memory of Hrothgar's friendship. A shining example, truly, of a loyal kinsman's fealty and love, which it were well if all royal kinsmen took to heart. But how many, alack, are there who will, instead, spread the deceitful snare for their trusting com-

rade's feet and secretly, with wicked guile, contrive his death !

From this time on, Beowulf steadily grew in honours and in his sovereign's confidence. He conducted himself on all occasions wisely and with discretion. Never did he smite his hearth-fellows in their cups. For his was no ruffian soul ; but of all mankind he most wisely controlled the great talents which God had given him. Men saw and wondered at him. For they had held him in little esteem for a long time, because of his modest, reserved ways, which did not court attention ; and when he was a lad, he had often been called slack and unpromising. Now, however, every rash judgment was reversed, as the mature man stood radiant in his glory, the very next to the King, who girded him with his own father's gold-mounted battle-sword, King Hrethel's heirloom, than which there was no more renowned weapon among the Goths. At the same time he conferred on him seven thousand hides of land, a princely mansion, and a seat of authority in the Council.

Not many years passed thus peacefully. There was war once more and Hygelac fell in battle in the distant land of the sea-going Frisians. Beowulf saved himself by a feat of swimming which no man but he could have performed, and reached Gothland unharmed. There he found the young widowed Queen, Hygd, beside herself with grief and alarm. She proffered him treasure and realm, jewels and throne; for she had no confidence in her young son Heardred, who was scarcely more than a child, that he would be able to hold the ancestral seats against the Frisians, whose invasion was expected from day to day. But neither she nor the bereaved people could prevail with the loyal kinsman and chieftain to break faith with his dead cousin; he upheld young Heardred in the public assembly, respectfully and with friendly guidance, until the time that he was of full age, when he resigned to him the power which he had wielded only so long as duty bade. But fortune soon after proved fatal to young Heardred. He, too, was killed in

war. Then ancient Hrothgar's prophecy came true, and Beowulf found himself King of the Goths. He had not sought or coveted the dignity, giving the elder line always his whole-hearted, undivided service. But when the broad realm came to his hand, he took it as a trust placed in his charge by God, and governed it well for fifty winters, a true ethel-warden—noble guardian of the people. But envious fate, which is ever on the lurk, would not suffer the venerable King to end his days in undisturbed prosperity.





LAY III

THE DRAGON

I

THE TREASURE

IN the land of the Goths, high on a rocky steep above the sea, there stood a lonely stronghold, built of stone. A narrow path led to it from the beach beneath, but it was unfrequented by people, because the castle was tenanted by a Dragon, who had, for three hundred years, kept guard over a treasure of gold and silver—rings, bracelets, jewelled drinking-cups, daggers and swords, and armour of all kinds. This treasure was the legacy of an ancient band of men, war-companions long forgotten. Death took them all off,

one after another, and left one solitary survivor, to mourn for lost friends and enjoy for a short while the accumulated wealth.

There was a forsaken barrow on the down near by, where a huge cliff hung sheer over the water. Thither the solitary man carried all the beaten gold and silver, and having buried it all, spoke a few farewell words :

“ Hold thou now, O Earth, the wealth of mighty heroes, who cannot guard it any longer. Death in battle has carried them all away, my friends, my peers ; they share the bliss of Woden’s heavenly hall, where only brave warriors slain in the field are admitted. No one henceforth will furbish the embossed tankard, the precious sword, or the helmet damaskeened with gold ; the armour will moulder by the side of the warrior who wore it ! ”

Thus the sole survivor of a brave company lamented his unhappiness, by day and by night, until the finger of Death touched his heart also, and it stood still.

The dazzling hoard, now unguarded,

was found by the old pest of twilight, that haunteth barrows, the scaly spiteful Dragon, that flieth by night, enwrapt in fire, whom country-folk hold in awe and dread. His great delight is to sit on underground hoards and gloat there. Thus it happened that, having discovered this enormous treasure-house, he held it for three hundred years, until something occurred which angered him and let him loose on the unhappy land.

Some unknown man was fleeing in a feud, houseless and pursued, and in his flight he stumbled on the barrow and on the Dragon asleep therein upon the glittering hoard. Horror-struck, he was turning to escape while he might, but a jewelled tankard caught his eye and he just snatched it before he ran, his heart misgiving him at the time that he was bringing woe on many by the deed. But something impelled him, stronger than reason—so he snatched and ran, hugging the precious bauble, which he carried to his liege lord, who pursued him, as a pledge of peace, and bought his lord's

friendship and his own safety therewith. He also revealed the hiding-place of the hoard ; the chieftain hastened thither without delay, the barrow was rifled of many of its jewels, while the Dragon still slept his long, heavy sleep—and the mischief was done !

When the Worm woke and found himself despoiled, his fury was intense ; but he mastered it at first, to make his vengeance more complete and sure. First of all he sniffed at the scent along the rock, and at once came upon the track of the enemy, whose foot had stepped unawares by his very head as he lay asleep. He sought diligently for the man, going over the ground whither the scent took him ; in more and more fiery and raging mood he kept swinging around and around the barrow. There was not any man there in all that desert waste. All the while he matured in his breast his purpose of dire and bloody work. Every now and then he would dash back into the barrow, as though to satisfy himself once more of what he knew already : that there had been plunder

done,—then he would dash out again. He could hardly wait for the night to come. But presently the day waned at last, and the Worm had his will : no longer would he bide in fenced walls, but issue forth, equipped with fire, to do havoc all over the land. Thus it was that the Dragon's vengeance had a sore beginning for the people ; soon it was to have a sorer ending for their ruler and benefactor.





II

THE ATTACK

ONCE the monster had begun his fiery raids, he did not stop them again. Far into each night blazed the farmsteads, late so cheerful. The flying pest would fain have left nothing alive where his vast form hovered in the air on broad black pinions, like to a huge smoke-cloud, with live-coal eyes and flame squirting and snorting from open maw and distended nostrils. It was only just before the break of day that he shot back again to his dark mansion for protection ; for he trusted his rocky keep ; only that trust deceived him in the end.

Soon it was reported to Beowulf (for evil tidings travel swift and sure), that his own mansion, noblest of buildings, even his own royal seat, the gift of the Goths,

was melting away in fiery waves. So sorely was the venerable King smitten to the heart at this great outrage, that he was tempted to break out into revilings against Providence, much against his wont, for never was man gentler in his valour, more pious in his power.

Deeply did Beowulf revolve in his thoughts how he should deliver himself and his people from this new pest, after the many, many years of peace and happiness. The memories of his youth, of the time when he, a victorious boy, had purged Hrothgar's hall, single-handed, of Grendel and his loathsome brood, were still green with him, and the thought of going forth to seek the Dragon with a host, or even a band of men, was abhorrent to him. He decided to go and look about him with only eleven companions, led by the finder of the first jewelled tankard, the cause of the baleful feud, who went as the thirteenth of the party. Then the aged King sat him down on the headland, and began to bid farewell to his hearth-fellows. For his heart was heavy within him and full of

boding sadness, and his thoughts travelled back, as aged men's thoughts are apt to do when they feel the hour of the last separation drawing nigh—back across the entire field of life's achievements, dwelling longest on what looms remotest. Thus now the ancient warrior, while going over the days of his youth in rather rambling speech, dwelt most lovingly on the time when, as a stripling, he did page's service at the court of Hygelac's father, Hrethel, to whom his own father gave him when only seven years old, and who had raised and fostered him, and held him as dear as his own sons. Then, turning back to the present and its stern necessities, he addressed an affectionate word to each of his more familiar comrades, still harping on his dislike to fight the monster with any but naked hands :

“I would not willingly bear sword or weapon to meet this Worm, as I formerly did not against Grendel. I expect to meet scorching fire, deadly venom ; therefore shall I carry a strong shield and wear a fine mail-shirt. As for you, my men-at-

arms, wait ye here on the mountain to see which of us twain falls, deadly stricken there on the rock."

As he spoke, the brave old warrior rose by the brink of the down and sternly scanned the place around, when, not far from where they stood, he beheld a rocky arch, and out of it a stream breaking from the barrow, steaming hot, so no man might come nigh the hoard unscorched and survive the Dragon's flame.

Then did the Prince of the Goths let forth out of his breast a mighty battle-shout, which stirred the keeper of the hoard under his hoary rock. There was now no time for reflection or for parleying, for from out the rock there came the hot reeking breath of the monster, like a cloud of steam; and hardly had the hero swung his shield and taken his stand well up by it, when the ringy Worm suddenly rolled forth and buckled himself into a bow, and thus, curved like an arch, emitting flame, advanced upon his human foe in a rapid, gliding shuffle. The shield, indeed, protected awhile the glorious

chieftain, but when he raised his arm to smite with the sword, which he had been persuaded to take, the stroke, though hard, proved inefficient, and only roused the furious Dragon to greater rage, so that now it cast forth devouring fire in volumes and the deadly sparks sprang every way.

And now, when the combatants closed again, the monster's breast shot steam in scalding jets, and the man stood at bay, unseen for the fire which encompassed him. And of his own band of eleven comrades, sons of ethelings all, not one stood his ground, but all, horror stricken, slunk away to the woods for shelter.





III

WIGLAF

NO, not all. One among them proved a faithful follower,—Wiglaf, Weohstan's son, Beowulf's youngest comrade and his much-loved kinsman. When he beheld his liege lord in such sore distress, his heart smote him, as he thought of the lands and honours the King had so lately bestowed on him, and of the justice he had publicly rendered him and his father in a just feud—and gratitude moved him deeply.

This was the first adventure on which the young etheling had embarked with his liege lord. When he saw his fellows shamefully scurrying off, mindful only of their own safety, he turned on them and upbraided them with hottest words of noble anger.

“What!” he cried, “and shall we thus forsake our lord, with whom we were fain to revel in the festive hall, drinking his mead, taking his golden rings and well-tempered swords? He chose us out of all his host for this adventure because he counted us stout warriors and loyal friends. Now the day is come when he needs the strength of his followers. No matter that he intended to achieve this great deed single-handed—let us stand by him! God knows that I for one had liefer the flame would swallow me up with him than stand away now! I think it shame that we should bear our shields safe home unless we rescue the life of our lord. Is this acting according to our old customs, that we leave him, alone of noble Goths, to bear the brunt and fall in an unequal fight?”

Thus speaking, young Wiglaf boldly plunged into steam and smoke, with his helmet on his head, shouting loud :

“My liege Beowulf! now make good the boast of thy youth, that never in thy lifetime wouldst thou suffer thy glory to

decline,—and I shall stand by thee and support thee to the uttermost.”

The fell, malignant monster heard the cheering words and came on with redoubled fury, to engage his hated enemies. In an instant the wooden lining of Wiglaf's shield was consumed by the flame; but he went forward under shelter of his elder kinsman's shield when his own was reduced to ashes. Then the old fire of battle burned high in the valiant King's breast, and he smote the Worm so desperate a blow, that the weapon stood in his head, deep stuck; but Naegling, the good sword, flew in splinters as it struck, betraying its master as other blades had done before; for it was not given him that steel should help him in a fight.

And now, enraged even unto death, the Dragon, after yielding ground somewhat, made a rush at the hero, whose strength was giving way apace, and, opening wide his reeking jaws, enclosed his foe's neck with his sharp, long fangs, till the blood flowed in streams.



IV

VICTORY AND DEATH

L OUD is the minstrels' song in praise of Wiglaf, the fearless young etheling, and the prowess he displayed in his aged kinsman's behalf, giving him time to recover his senses, so that at the monster's third onslaught, he could draw the knife from his belt and gash the Worm from below, in the middle, with deadly stab. This was the supreme hour of triumph in the hero's career, when his winged, scaly foe fell off writhing and gasping out his life.

But in the wound which those cruel fangs had inflicted, the venom began its deadly work. In vain young Wiglaf, sitting down on a stone by the mound where his liege lord lay exhausted, applied all the

remedies taught him by the leech-lore of cunning dwarfs,—unloosened the helmet, cooled the swelling neck with water which he ladled on it with his hand, and laid on healing herbs which grew in plenty out of the bountiful earth: the hurt was mortal, with each moment life was burning away, with the fiery poison spreading through all the vital parts. Beowulf knew that the tale of his days was told, and he was spending his last hours on earth. But the hero's brave soul did not quail. He looked death in the face, now that it bent close over him, as calmly as he was wont in the days when it was but a distant shadow on the battle-field. The one regret which he expressed was at having no son to whom he could bequeath his royal armour. But he took comfort in the consciousness of having been a just ruler.

“I have ruled this people fifty winters,” he said; “there was not a king who dared threaten them with war. Yet did I hold my own by justice. I have not sought unjust quarrels nor have I sworn many false oaths. Thinking of all this, I am

able, though sick unto death with many wounds, to take comfort, for the Ruler of men cannot charge me with murder of kinsmen, when my life quitteth the body."

Yet the dying hero had one wish which he begged his young kinsman to satisfy ere his sight and senses failed him ; he fain would have a glimpse of the treasure which he had bought with his life : " Now quickly go thou, beloved Wiglaf," he said to his faithful comrade, " and examine the treasure under the hoary rock, now the Worm lieth dead. I would have a look at the curious gems, the hoarded store ; then would I more contentedly resign my life and the lordship I have held so long."

Not a moment did the devoted youth lose in obeying his beloved lord's behest. He hurried to the lair of the Worm and gazed with amazement on the numberless and wondrous things of value which filled the barrow, heaped and crushed together, indenting the ground where the Dragon had lain on them. The gold was losing its burnish, the precious stones were falling out, bracelets and helmets were eaten

by rust, losing their value day by day. Thus can treasure, buried idly in the earth, make fools of men! One great marvel of cunningest handicraft Wiglaf beheld looming high above the hoard; it was a banner, all golden, which gave forth a gleam of light so bright that it illumined the darkest recesses of the hollow barrow and made it easy to examine all the hidden curiosities.

In great haste, hardly pausing to glance at the uncovered treasure, Wiglaf gathered into his bosom and arms cups and platters, bracelets and rings, and snatching also the magic banner, eagerly returned to the mound with his spoils, anxiously wondering in his faithful heart whether he should find his lord alive still where he left him painfully breathing. Dropping the riches on the ground without a thought of them, he quickly knelt by the side of his King, and again began to sprinkle him with water, till he had restored him to consciousness and speech. As Beowulf opened his eyes and beheld the gold for a glimpse of which he had

longed, his brow cleared, and he spoke in feeble, but cheerful tones :

“ I do give thanks to the Lord of all, the Giver of all things, for those spoils upon which I here do gaze ; to think that I have been permitted to acquire such great wealth for my earls and thanes to enjoy and to remember me by after my death ! I have sold my life for this treasure—do thou now provide for my men, for I shall be with them no more. Order my brave warriors to erect a lofty cairn—a mound of stones, after the death-fire has burned out, here on the headland above the sea. It shall tower aloft for a memorial to my friends, and seafaring men shall call it Beowulf’s Barrow, as they drive their foamy barks over the dangerous waters.”

Then the dying hero took off his gold collar and with feeble hands gave it to the young thane ; also bade him take his coroneted helmet and his mail-shirt, and wear them and do honour to his chieftain’s armour.

Once more the King spoke, with failing

breath: "Thou art the last remnant of our race. "Fate has swept all my kinsmen into eternity, princes in chivalry; and now I must follow them."

This was the aged monarch's last speech; with the words his soul fled from his bosom, to enter into the everlasting rest of the righteous.





V

WIGLAF'S REBUKE—DISMAY AND TEARS

A SAD, agonizing hour it was for the warm-hearted youth, new to the world and its trials, when he sat upon the ground taking in the first great grief of his life, as he gazed on the body of the man who had been dearest to him on earth. Small comfort he took from the sight of his dead foe, the horrible Dragon, as he lay at a little distance, uncoiled and harmless for evermore. Weary of heart, but still nursing some sort of stubborn, unavailing hope, he sat by his lord's shoulder and still kept sprinkling him with water, till he saw his ten faint-hearted comrades, as they came sneaking shamefacedly from the woods, slowly trailing their shields along to the place where the King lay dead.

Grief gave way to righteous anger at the sight. Sternly did young Wiglaf look upon the men he no longer loved, and bitter rebuke flowed unchecked from his lips.

“ Now, look you,” he cried ; “ well may a man who is minded to speak the truth, say that the chieftain who gave you those costly gewgaws, that warlike apparel in which you stand there before me, who at the ale-bench so often presented his thanes with helmet and mail-shirt, utterly and wretchedly threw his gifts away. For, verily, little cause had he to boast of his companions-in-arms in the hour of danger ! Nevertheless, it was given him by God, the Ordainer of victories, to avenge himself single-handed when his valour was put to the proof. For little protection could I afford him, though I attempted what was beyond my strength, in trying to help my kinsman. Now go, ye cravens ! No share of the treasure is there for you or yours. And may every man of your kin be sent forth into life-long exile, deprived of lands and rights, as soon as the ethelings now at a distance come together and are

told of your disloyalty, your shameful desertion. Go—and learn from experience that, to a warrior, death is better far than a life of shame !”

When he had relieved his feelings by this thundering outburst, Wiglaf gave orders to make the woful issue of the conflict known to the host of thanes and earls who, by the master's command, had been encamped over the sea-cliff and had sat there all day long by their shields, their souls divided betwixt hope and fear. One young thane rode up the bluff, sent by the rest, to view the fatal scene and report to them, which he did faithfully, in words pregnant with grief for the present and foreboding for the near future.

“ Now we may soon look for war,” he concluded his report ; “ as soon as the King's death is made known among the Franks and Frisians. For never, since Hygelac fell, have we enjoyed the goodwill of the Merovingian Kings of the Franks, nor do I count upon peace or good understanding on the side of the Swedes—such is the feud and grudge of

all these nations ever since the fall of Hygelac on Frisian land. They will surely attack us as soon as they learn that our Prince is dead, he who has so long upheld against all foes our treasure and our realm, winning ever greater respect in public counsel, and ever greater fame in war. Now methinks that quickness were best; so let us look our last upon the mighty King, and bring him without delay to the funeral pyre. And yonder is a hoard of precious things, gold untold, jewels purchased with our hero's own life-blood. Never a warrior shall wear any of those ornaments; never a maiden have on her neck one of those collars. Sorrowful and stripped of gold ornaments shall all come to the funeral procession, while many a hand shall swing the spear in the cold of the morning; music of the harp shall not waken the warriors on the fateful day; but the ominous raven, fluttering and chattering of slaughter, will tell the eagle of his luck, while, alongside of the grim and hungry wolf, he stripped the slain."

Upon hearing the grief-stricken youth's

discourse, all the troop arose and sadly, under gushing tears, wended their way under the crag, to behold the gruesome sight. There they found, stretched lifeless on the sand, the man who had given them so many rings in bygone times, and, at but a short distance from him, the carcase of the loathsome beast, all scorched with its own flames—never saw they more frightful object. It was fifty feet long where it lay. No more through the regions of air would he sportively whirl at midnight, then down again pounce to rejoice in his lair—he would have no use for caverns any more. And there, unwatched, open to all men's eyes, lay bowls and dishes and swords of price, all rusty and corroded, as though they had lain in the earth's lap a thousand winters ; for this treasure had been bound by a magic spell, so that it might never be touched of man, unless God Himself granted to one of His choice to open the enchanted hoard ; and that man was to leave his life as ransom—such was Beowulf's lot.



VI

THE OBSEQUIES

AND now Wiglaf once more lifted up his voice :

“ Alas ! we were not able to convince our beloved master that he should not challenge yonder monster, but should leave him to dwell unmolested in his haunts to the end of the world. But it is done—the hoard lies open before us, purchased at a fearful price. I was inside the chamber of the barrow and explored the whole of it, and all the stores it held ; for, once the price was paid, the spell was broken, and the passage open to all. Hurriedly I grabbed with my hands a huge burden of treasure and carried it hither to the feet of my King. He was still alive then, wise and sensible ; freely did he talk, although

the death-pang was upon him. And he bade me give you all his greeting and tell you his will : that ye should build up, in memory of your chieftain's deeds, on the very place of the funeral pyre, a stone-cairn of the highest, forasmuch as he was of all men the most famous warrior, as long as it was given him to dwell in his royal castle. And now let us go, all together, and visit the fatal hoard. I will be your guide, and ye shall have your fill of gazing on gold and jewels. After that, let us make ready the bier, and promptly equip it, and so let us convey our beloved master to the place where he shall tarry long in the keeping of the Almighty."

Then, by Wiglaf's orders, commands were sent round to many householders, that they should haul timber, stout and sound, to do the last service to the ruler of men.

While this was being done, Wiglaf called out of the band seven of the King's thanes, the choicest ; led by him, the eighth, they went under the dangerous roof, one warrior walking in front, bearing in his

hand a flaming torch. When they had taken a view of the treasure, lying there keeperless and undefended, they did not stand upon the order of casting lots as to who should loot the hoard, but went to work with all despatch to empty the chamber. Then, taking hold of the dead Dragon, they haled him away and shoved him over the precipitous cliff. With a great splash the waves engulfed him, and that was the last of him. In the meantime, the gold was laden on waggons, which followed the bier whereon the hero was borne to the high, jutting headland which he had chosen for his resting-place.

There they constructed for him a huge pyre, which they hung all round with helmets, battle-shields, bright mail-shirts; and in the midst of the pyre, heaving deep sighs, they laid their beloved lord. Then the warriors set fire to the pile in several places; the smoke, heavy and black, mounted up to the sky, the ruddy flames shot aloft, their roaring mingling with the howling of the winds, until the house of flesh and bone was utterly consumed.

With sore hearts and care-laden minds, the warriors stood around and silently mourned their liege lord, the while a dirge of sorrow was sung by an aged dame, whose dishevelled hair streamed in the wind. The blue heavens swallowed up the black smoke.

Then did the people go to work and construct a barrow and a cairn of stones on the hill. It was high and broad, and seafaring men would behold it from a great distance. Ten days they laboured. With great skill they surrounded the ashes of the pyre with a noble embankment, and the pile rose like a beacon for all coming ages, even as the memory of the hero's deeds and noble character.

As to the fated hoard, they buried the whole in the barrow under the cairn, and left it there, where it remains to this day as useless to mankind as it has been ever since the last of a company of unknown earls consigned it to the earth's keeping.

Last of all funeral ceremonies, twelve youths, sons of ethelings, rode around the barrow. From time to time they

stopped in the race, to bewail their loss, and bemoan their King, to recite an elegy in his honour, to celebrate his name and rehearse his deeds, extolling his manhood with admiring words.

Thus did the nobles of the Goths, the companions of his hearth, lament the fall of Beowulf, their lord. They said that he was of all kings in the world the mildest and most affable to his men, most genial to his nobles, and most desirous of glory.





NOTE ON THE "BEOWULF"

NO monument of ancient national literature has been—and to a great extent still is—so overlooked and underrated as the Anglo-Saxon epic of "Beowulf." It has, indeed, been edited and re-edited, and duly commented on, and it is entered in the university curriculum of Anglo-Saxon. But how great a proportion of even interested students pursue their English studies as far back as Anglo-Saxon? A cultured general reader would vainly ask for a readable translation, even in prose, of the "Beowulf;" nor would he be likely to ask for one, as there is nothing in even the best histories of English literature, native or foreign, to awaken a feeling of sympathetic curiosity—nothing more than either a bare mention, or at best, a brief account, always insufficient and fre-

quently misleading. And—proof positive of the poem's total lack of popularity—it has never yet been illustrated.

An untoward fate seemed to pursue the "Beowulf" even before it came into the hands of the scholars. There is only one manuscript of it in existence, which is hid away among nine others, comparatively unimportant, in a folio volume labelled *Vitellius A, XV.*, and belonging to the Cottonian Library in the British Museum. It was noticed for the first time, in 1705, in a catalogue of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts (Wanley's), in which it is described as containing an account of certain wars between Sweden and Denmark. Needless to say it is nothing of the kind. The notice was not inviting, and nobody paid much attention to it. One hundred years later, in 1807, Sharon Turner mentioned the poem in his *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, and even attempted a translation of a few extracts, with but indifferent success, owing to the then still very imperfect knowledge of Anglo-Saxon versification and poetic language. Still, the poem

was now treated with respect, and the study of it was taken up conscientiously, by some even enthusiastically.

But the students encountered difficulties which they would have been spared a hundred or even eighty years before: the original manuscript—the only one—was no longer intact. It had been badly injured in a fire which broke out in the Cottonian Library in 1731, destroying 114 volumes and damaging 98 others, "so as to make them defective," in the words of the report; and among these "defective" ones was our folio. Numerous leaves were scorched, and of these, again, many chipped off in the course of time, doing away with many ends of lines. The loss, of course, is irretrievable, but fortunately not so great as to impair materially the sense and the value of the whole. Strangely enough, the same fate, only worse, overtook the first attempt at an edition of the poem. The Danish scholar, Thorkelin, had brought home two complete copies of it, for purposes of study and translation. During twenty years he gave the work

much time, off and on, and had the poem almost ready for the press when, in 1807, his house was burned down during the bombardment of Copenhagen by the English, and his edition of the "Beowulf" perished, with most of his books. However, the two manuscript copies having fortunately escaped destruction, Thorkelin had the extraordinary courage to do the work over again, and in 1815 came out the first edition of the "Beowulf,"—the first printed text, with a parallel Latin translation and indices. Since then scholars have done their duty by this noble monument—in every way except making it popular.

Coming now to the discussion of the poem itself, the peculiarity which strikes us most at the first reading is that, while it is avowedly the national epic of the Anglo-Saxons and one of the oldest monuments of the Anglo-Saxon language, the hero is a Goth, and the action takes place

¹ A very complete survey of the critical and philological work done on the "Beowulf" up to date will be found in the Introduction to Professor John Earle's literal prose translation (with notes) published at Oxford in 1892.

in Denmark and in Sweden. Yet the scenery described is that of a part of Northumbria, in England, which can be identified to this day, and some of the names of the locality are said to tally with those in the poem. It would seem, therefore, that the Angles and Saxons, who were near neighbours of the Danes in the German mother-country, brought the story over to the British Island and it was retold in literary poetic form before the Danes came over as pirates and conquerors. Had the poem been written after this event, a Swedo-Danish hero could hardly have been adopted by the subjugated Anglo-Saxons, nor could the Danes have been mentioned with such absolute absence of animosity.

Another not only peculiar but highly puzzling feature is that there are two Beowulfs: the second king of the Skylding dynasty (also called Beow), Beowulf the Dane; and the hero of the poem, Beowulf the Goth, who comes over the sea, with a picked band of Goths, to deliver the Skyldings from a most untoward visitation.

What makes this thing stranger still, is that the poem begins with a glorification of the warlike Danes, leading us to expect that it is their national hero whose exploits we are to be called upon to admire. Instead of which, the Danes appear only in the not very admirable *rôle* of people who endure an intolerable nuisance passively for twelve years, unable to rid themselves of it—a fact which is duly brought home to them by their deliverer in a moment of legitimate irritation. The reason for this curious incongruity lies almost certainly in the alterations which the old story underwent,—as all epic stories did in the progress of oral transmission, and even in the first written attempts, which were often cast and re-cast before they reached their final form. Originally, the second Beowulf was certainly a Dane and a Skylding. As such, he would quite naturally and properly be named after the ancestor who is held up as a model prince in the prologue. The latest criticism detects in the poem itself traces amounting to intrinsic proof that such was the case. It was nat-

ural that Beowulf, himself a Skylding, should be the champion and deliverer of his people and house, and, after the death of the aged king, should be called to the throne by the country for which he had laboured and fought. Gothland is evidently, to use the clever French phrase, "dragged in by the hair"; by whom and for what reason, is immaterial to the mere reading of the story. But a genealogical connection between the two Beowulfs is felt as an imperious necessity, and the absence of it is a glaring inconsistency which it would be hopeless to attempt to smooth over or explain away for the benefit of youthful readers, whose exacting logic in such things is proverbial. Wherefore the expedient has been resorted to in the present volume of making the second Beowulf a Skylding *by his mother*—an expedient innocent enough, since we are not told who was his mother; and why could not a royal daughter of Denmark be married to a royal thane of Gothland?

As to the authorship of the poem, it is of course obscure. But the latest criticism

shows good reason to ascribe it to a high Church dignitary—possibly Hygeberht, Bishop of Litchfield—statesman and courtier at the time of the great Offa II., King of Mercia (mentioned with great, but not servile praise in Lay II.), who in the second half of the eighth century gathered the entire Heptarchy under his overlordship. The few historical touches betray the man versed in the affairs of more countries than his own.¹

¹ For the very interesting development of this hypothesis, as well as for other points of exhaustive research and criticism, see J. Earle's Introduction, already alluded to.

Professor Earle's version has been fully utilised in the present volume, even to the extent of frequently making use of its wording, where it was not too archaic or literal for ordinary reading purposes.





KEY TO THE PRONUNCIATION OF PROPER NAMES.

Aeschere . . .	Es'-kâ-râ.
Alberich . . .	Äl'-ber-ic.
Balmung . . .	Bäll'-müng.
Bechlaren . . .	Bec-lä'-ren.
Beowulf . . .	Bī'-o-wulf.
Breca . . .	Brâ'-kâ.
Brunhilde . . .	Brūn-hil'-dâ.
Dankwart . . .	Dank'-värt.
Eckewart . . .	Eck'-e-värt.
Etzel . . .	Et'-sel.
Folker . . .	Foll'-ker.
Gernot . . .	Gêr'-nöt.
Giselher . . .	Gī'-zel-hâr.
Grendel . . .	Gren'-del.
Gunther . . .	Gūn'-ter.
Hagen . . .	Häg'-en.
Hela . . .	Hâ'-lä.
Helferich . . .	Hel'-fer-ic.
Helke . . .	Hel'-kâ.
Heorot . . .	Hī'-o-röt.
Heremod . . .	Hâ'-re-möd.
Hildebrand . . .	Hil'-de-bränd.

* Hrethel . . .	Hrâ'-thel.
* Hrothgar . . .	Hroth'-gar.
* Hrunting . . .	Hrunt'-ing.
Hygd . . .	Hïgd.
Hygeberht . . .	Hig'-e-bêrt.
Hygelac . . .	Hig'-e-lâc.
Isenstein . . .	Ï'-sen-stîne.
Kriemhilde . . .	Krîm-hil'-dâ.
Ludegast . . .	Lû'-de-gâst.
Naegling . . .	Nâg'-ling.
Nibelungs . . .	Nî'-be-lungs.
Ortewein . . .	Orr'-te-vîne.
Rudiger . . .	Rû'-di-ger.
Siegfried . . .	Sïg'-frîd.
Sieglinde . . .	Sïg-lin'-dâ.
Siegmund . . .	Sïg'-mũnd.
Skyldings . . .	Skîld'-ings.
Thrytho . . .	Thrî'-thō.
Tronje . . .	Tron'-yâ.
Unferth . . .	Un'-ferth.
Ute . . .	Û'-tâ.
Valkyrie . . .	Vâl-kîr'-yâ.
Wealhtheow . . .	Wel'-thê-ō.
Weohstan . . .	Wî'-ō-stan.
Wiglaf . . .	Wig'-lâf.
Wolfhart . . .	Volf'-hârt.
Worms . . .	Vorms.
Wulfgar . . .	Wulf'-gâr.
Xante . . .	Kzân'-tâ.

* The H to be aspirated.

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